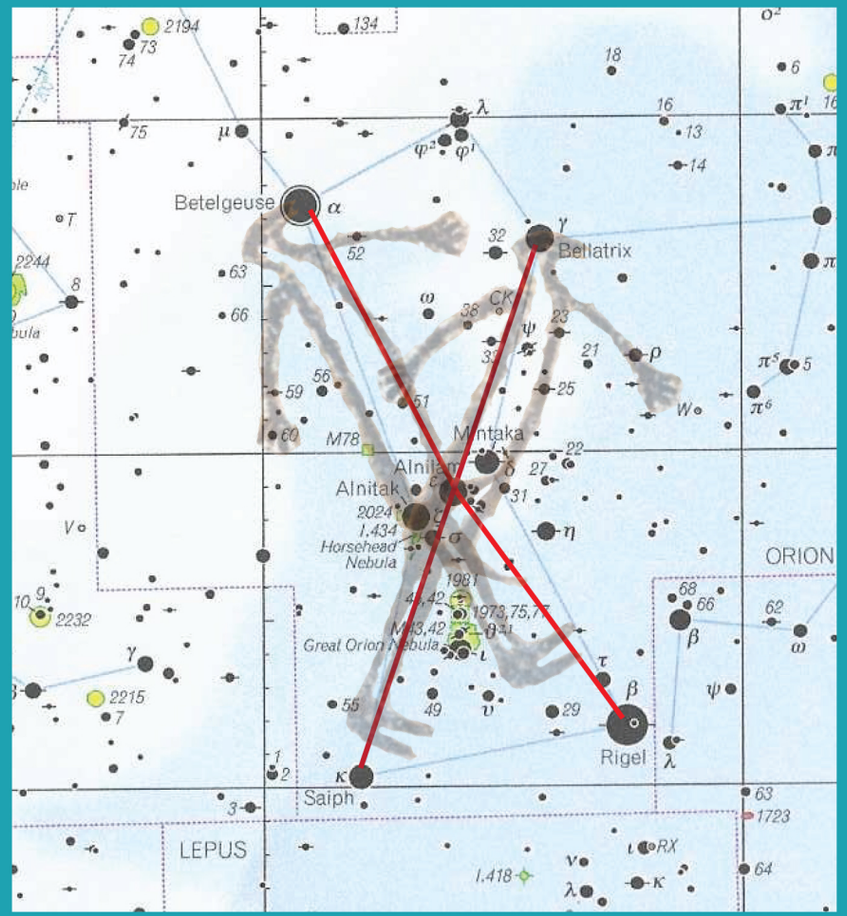
The birdman´s flight

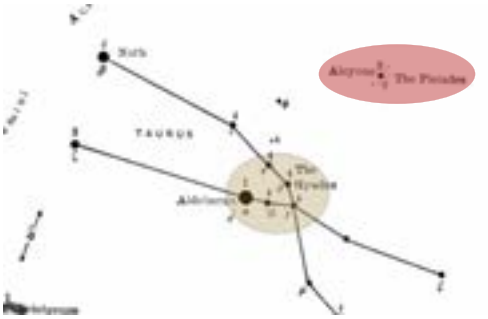
an opening to the Shaft Scene in Lascaux

by Alberto Davidoff

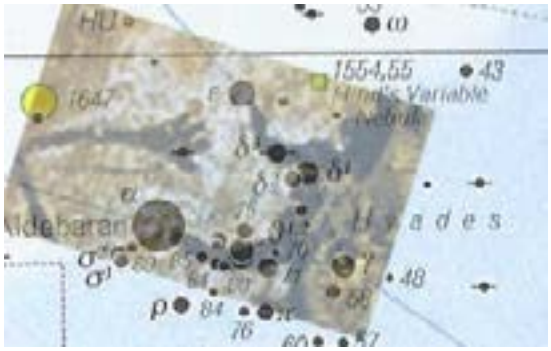


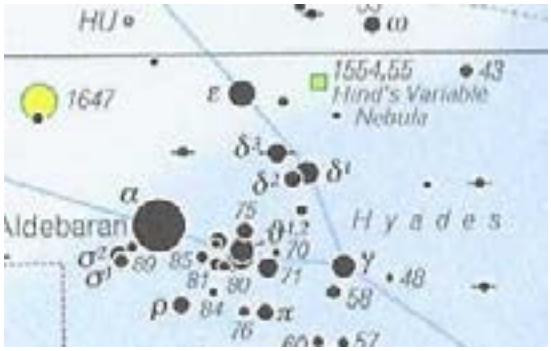
Danzig Monastir

For Alistar Coombs, the shaft scene in Lascaux is the most enigmatic image of Upper Paleolithic art.[1] There have been proposals about how some images in Lascaux (other to this scene) are related to constellations.[2] The case has also been made for the presence in such cave paintings of lunar cycles linked to the reproduction of the depicted animals.[3] We will show a specific correlation of this scene to the stars and then approach its possible meaning. Our interpretation will derive from ancient Egypt. Their worldview was my window to this mapping.[4]



1. The black lines show the horns of Taurus as they are now viewed in their entire length. The brown-shaded area matches the horns and eye of the bull in Lascaux. The pink area are the Pleiades. Between them is the path of the planets and Sun.





2-3. The horns and head are a string of more than twelve stars, with a vertex of the tips of the horns on one eye and a smaller star on the other. Adapting to the shape between the stars resulted in horns that are not paired and closely observed are awkwardly placed towards the neck.

Placing the tips of the horns and the eye of the bull[5] on an an expanded star map defines the position, orientation and proportion of the other figures. We will try to show the birdman has been intentionally displaced from Orion.

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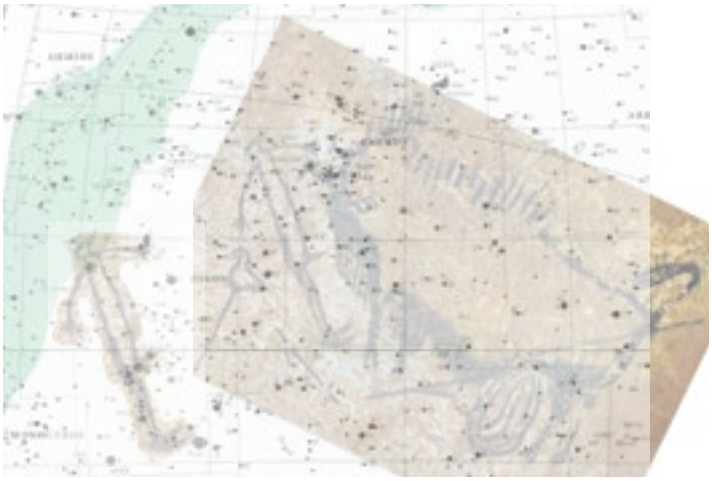
1 Coombs discusses the different interpretations of the scene in: https://alistaircoombs.com/2018/08/24/the-lascaux-shaft-scene.

2 Michael A. Rappenglück (1999) shows how Paleolithic man recognized different constellations and used them to orient himself in space and time. He delves into how this was part of their cosmovision. Frank Edge (1997) suggested the Hall of the Bulls in Lascaux depicted the summer sky, with the representation of Taurus-Pleiades. Luz Antequera Congregado (2001) studies constellations in cave art, including that of Lascaux. Sweatman & Coombs (2019) successfully studied another bull from Lascaux as Taurus. An obstacle to identifying Taurus with this particular image has been the understanding that the Taurus constellation has long horns (Glyn-Jones, 2008).

3 Bennet Bacon et al. (1923) write about a proto-writing system in Lascaux, Altamira, and Chauvet that associates animals with calendar information to track specific prey in certain geographical areas.

4 My first hint came from an article by William Glyn-Jones (2008), who proposed that the bull was Taurus and the birdman Gemini. He did not offer proof of this, but he mentioned that the bird on the stick was the equivalent of the icon of Horus on the column. He further stated that this bird was pictured in an Egyptian cave on a stick. Stylistically, it has been considered Franco-Cantabrian. Glyn-Jones (2008) mentions that Dirk Huyge has found the bird on the pole in early Egyptian rock art. Huyge describes this cave as Franco-Cantabrian style and dates it to between 8,000 and 10,000 B.C.

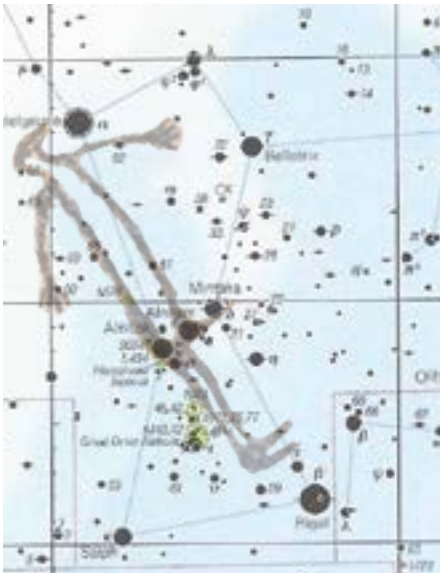
5 One tip coincided with Aldebaran, the other fell on Epsilon Tauri, which is part of the Hyades. A third point is the eye that falls on a Hyde from which the horns of Taurus are traditionally seen to split.



4.

The birdman follows the geometric features of Orion. He would have been intentionally moved closer to the bull. In figure 12, we will show how the rods that are present in the image can be re-assembled to calculate the distance of his displacement.

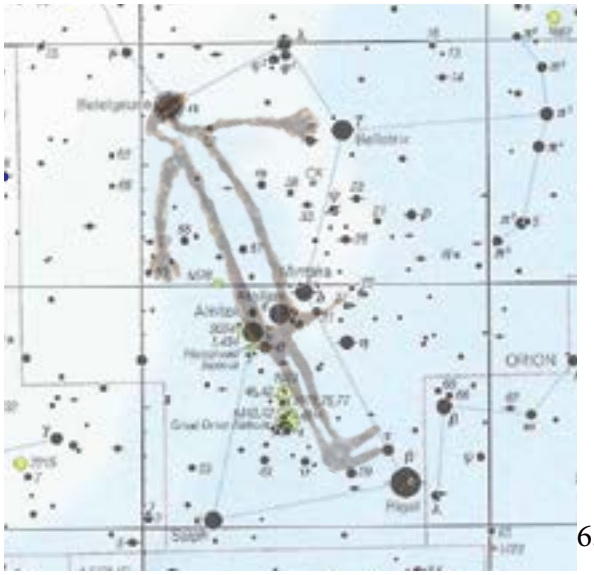
The birdman traces both Orion and star patterns in what will be his new home closer to Taurus. The tilting of the figures you will find here is induced by the shape of the birdman and could be thought as the turning of the dial in an astrolabe. The empty frame of the birdman and of the rhinoceros would serve the same purpose as the empty frame of the dials one can find in such instruments. It might point to the existence of an actual tool to watch the sky but the representation (deep in the ground) goes beyond instrumentality.[6] We will first place the birdman on Orion and slowly shift his angle towards the West as he reaches out to the stars with his left hand.[7]



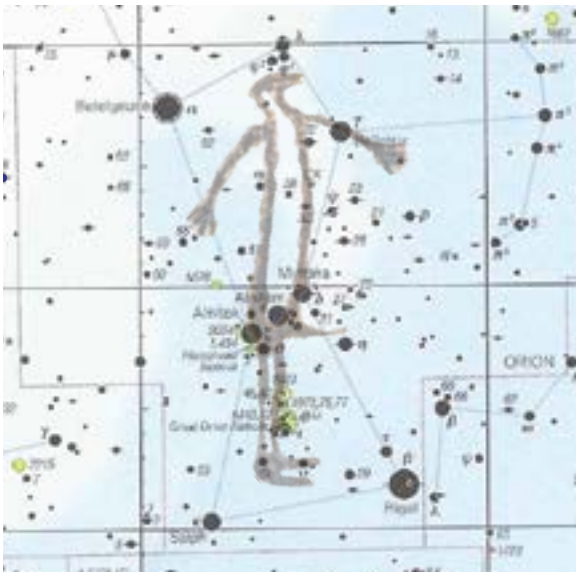
5. Match of Orion´s waist with the length of his phallus.
Other matches on his chest, back, hands and foot.

6 The inclination of Orion towards the West happens in the sky. The position of the stars on a birdman such as this one would be an effective element for orientation.

7 Not withstanding small variations of size, the birdman traces stars in Orion and Taurus. The overlays with the star maps should be done with actual measurements but these were not available to me. I took two sizes from different photos. I will use the smaller scale of the birdman based on figure 11 because it seems like the most frontal [fig. 11] and leave a larger scale image of the birdman (used in figure 4) as an appendix. Another variant for this analysis is the star atlases themselves that also have slight discrepancies. I used the *Cambridge Star Atlas*.

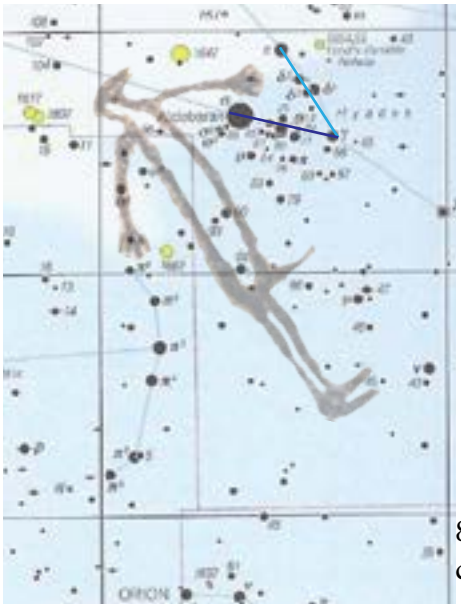


6. Match of stars with beak, hands, waist, feet.

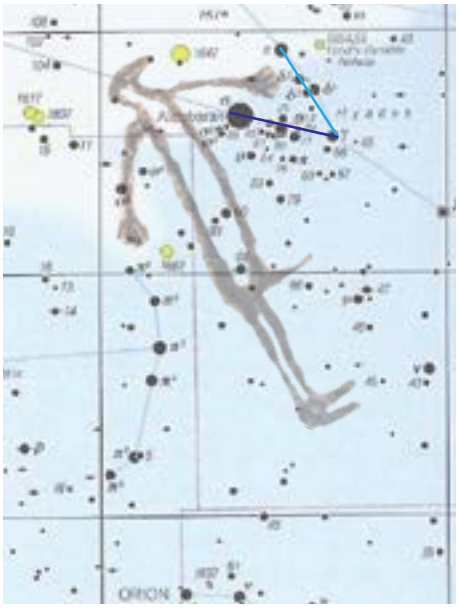


7. Match of stars with arm, waist, legs, ankle, foot.

He has now reached the opposite diagonal. He is ready to take flight to Taurus. We will move him almost to his actual position in Lascaux where the transposed birdman can be seen resting in a semicircle of stars (whose curve is later in time used to draw Orion´s bow or shield) held by his right hand. His left hand is in the center of the triangle.



8. Match of stars with both hands, arm, shoulder, chest, belly.



9. Match of stars with wrist, arm, beak, back of head.

The birdman traces stars and constellations with his body. He also adapts to new celestial settings. His erection suggests that sexuality is somehow involved with the scene.[8] As the birdman approaches a bull that is being castrated, he could be approaching a particular aspect of their shared sexuality. There would be an examination of the human and the bovine as interrelated beings.

We will explore the following narrative: The Magdelenian watched certain alignments both in the sky and in someone no longer held back by his constellation (his deep structuring) so that he could move (like a bird) to a new setting. The door of the sky was opened. In ancient Egypt this was a momentous event.

> The sky's door has been opened to you, that you may emerge from it as Horus.[9]

Horus was depicted as a man-bird. Of course, Horus was a god. But the verse also says to the pharaoh: 'May you emerge as Horus.'

8 The presence of sexuality in Paleolithic caves is evident in the pregnant, rut and mating animals, phallic implements and ityphallic human figures. The interpretation of these has mostly been about the importance of animal fertility for the subsistence of the communities but recently there has been a search for a deeper meaning. Ayhan Verit (2017) delves into the phallus as connector between man and the sacred. He goes further: "The symmetry of upper and lower parts of the body [he is describing an ityphallic figure with squred symetrical arms and legs and the phallus going down the middle very much like the Orion figure we will see in Egypt] as more likely a mirror image seemed to be reflecting the same respect for both sides of the world and may represent human body as the adaptor tool to transmit the energy in either direction."

9 Allen, 2015, p. 84.

11.

The rods and arrows in the rock painting show the way of a visual sequence that starts from under the tail. We will reach that point at the end and begin with what traditionally has been read as the castration of the bull. Two arrows take us to the standing bird. The path of the arms (while duplicating the head of the bird in the recumbent man) takes us to the horns of the bull. A conceptual circle is emphasized by the erection and the castration as opposites.

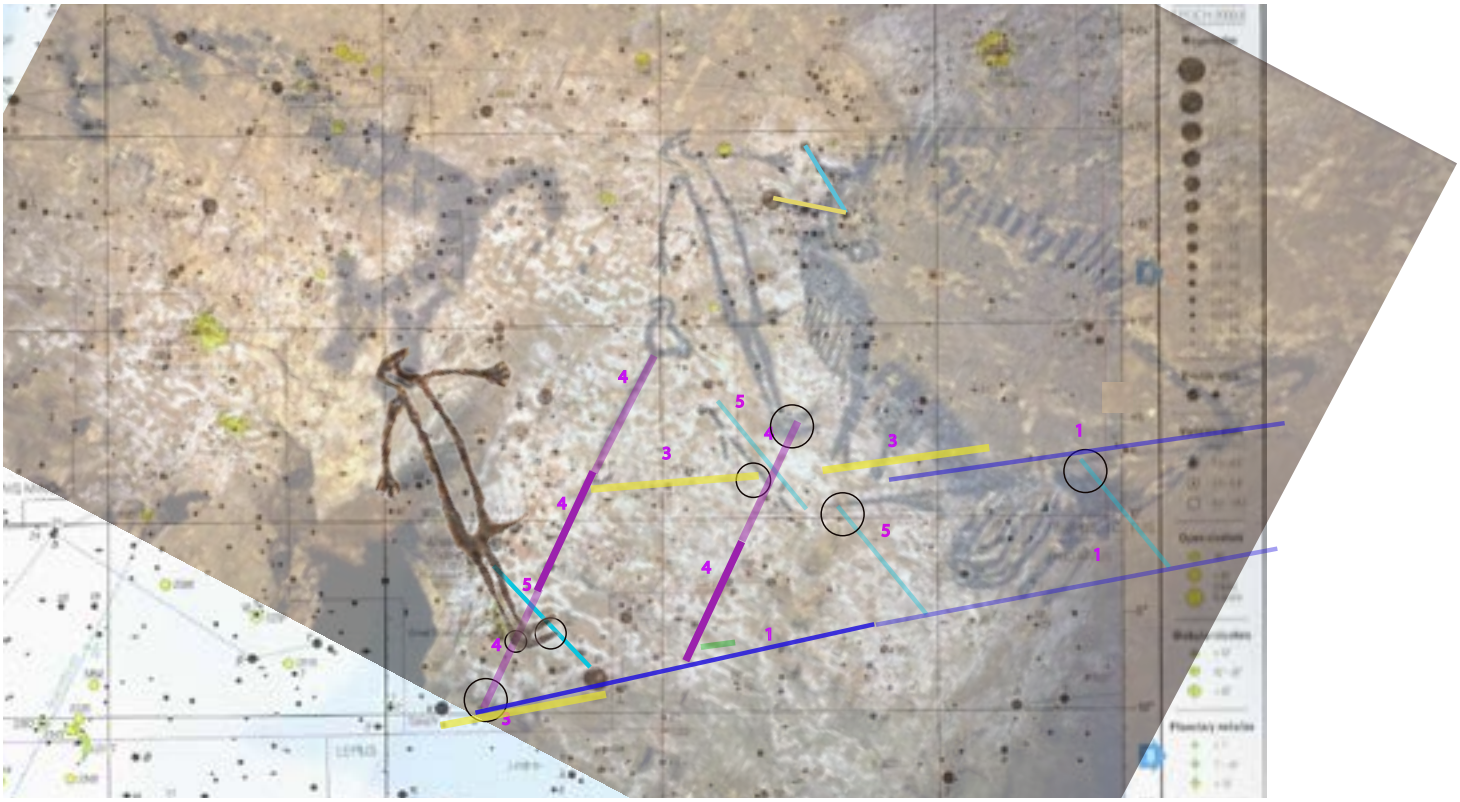
As the birdman, the bull will be shown to be in a process of becoming. The interpreters of the scene usually say the birdman is about to be gored by the bull, but one could also say that, in a strange way, the bull would also appear to be a motherly creature about to be stroked by one of her own. If we go back and look at the wound we will find the straight lines are a bull´s cut phallus and testicles but also, that the capsule around them could well be a budding udder still to grow its teats.[10] If so, there would also be a vulva under her tail. Some fragments from the pyramids say to the pharaoh:

> Your father is a great wild bull; your mother is a [great] wild cow...[11]

12.

10 These clearly defined lines and shape are usually interpreted as the spilling entrails of the bull.

11 Allen 2015, p. 84.



We explain in figures 12 and 43 how the displacement of the birdman to Orion is measured out by the rods.[12] Orion is between two worlds. In his descent (as he disappears from the sky) he will be gorged by the horns of the bull that are part of the cave surface and stomped by the Rhinoceros. He comes from a world of darkness.[13] In his ascent he becomes a celestial creature that has the potential for an even higher ascent.

A displacement into a celestial cow was studied in ancient Egypt. It had to do with breaking recurrence. Its outcome was the establishment by the sun of new fields in heaven.[14] The world they left behind (our world) was described as tired with death and disorder. The killings of Hathor (a goddess with horns closely related to cattle) crazed with mandrake[15] were turned into a new human realm. A divine round (present in

12 The color coding we used shows the transposition of their distances and angles(except in the top blue and yellow angle that is similar but not exact) as measurements in the sky. From left to right: 1. The purple line mirrors the shaft that splices the bull (it has two separate pieces 1, 3). We stopped at the tip of the one in the bottom and transferred its length to the darker purple shaft. The shaft was displaced South following the length of the light blue num. 5 shaft: set on the tip of this arrow (we will use its second half for a separate measurement). Multiplied by two the purple shaft crosses the base of Orion from Rigel towards Saiph. It will provide the resting place for the displacement of the birdman. The redish purple shaft num 4 of the perched bird multiplied by three reaches the floor line (1+1) and crosses the ankles and heel of the lower birdman. The light num 5 line has the inclination from Rigel to Alnitaka but does not quite reach the star. It does pass through the bottom toes of the lower birdman and so triangulates with number 4 his exact place. The number 3 line does cover the length and inclination that goes from Saiph to Rigel. The light blue and yellow shafts form a triangle that is almost symmetrical to the smaller triangle between the horns and the eye of the bull. The birdman is being displaced from one triangle to another. One triangle pulls from under the other from the upper body. It is also a 'higher' place in the visible sky. The angle of the displacement is given by the position of the stars in Orion. At the same time, the height is provided by the rolling of the bird across the angled line on top of a support whose length and angle are also determined by Orion and set out in with the rods.

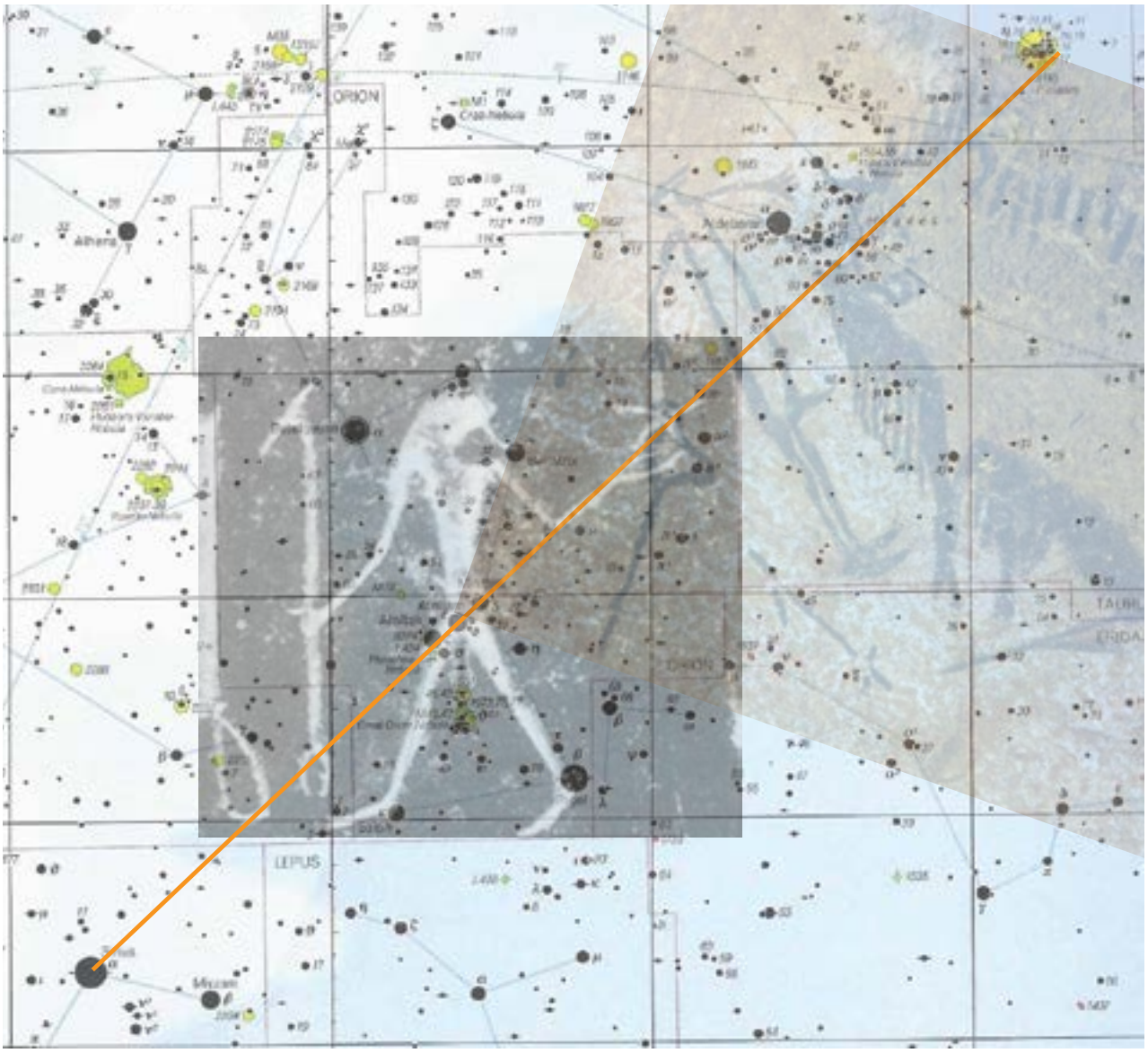
13 This would be the Egyptian Osiris being torn into pieces. It coincided with the overflowing of the Nile and the alignment of Sirus. We will look at Sirus´s relation to this gorge a bit further on.

14 Wallis Budge presented the text as " The legend of the destruction of Mankind." It is also known as "The Book of the Heavenly Cow."

15 Budge´s translation is for an unknown plant that he deemed to be an aphrodisiac.

the sky with the precision and the implacable strength of stars) was liberated into another.[16]

In Lascaux, the scaffolding for the relocation begins by inverting the triangle under the birdman´s feet. Each of the lines drawn around the bull has precise measures and angles derived from Orion to transport the figure into the proximity of Taurus. The rods point to geometric symmetries between both figures.



13.

Here, in a larger celestial map we place Osiris (understood to be Orion) and the bull on their corresponding stars. Osiris´s arm and star trace a straight line in the direction towards the first Hyade, the eye of the bull in Lascaux. This line was carefully watched by the Egyptians with the rising of Sirus.[17] It passed through two of the three stars in Orion´s waist and signaled the beginning of the Nile´s flood: the fragmentation of Osiris as he sustained a world of fertility. In ancient Greece, the appearance of the first Hyade signaled the time to thresh the seed before the rain.

Osiris will also travel from his position in Orion to a new setting close to the Pleiades (above his head). We can see this in the following image from Dendera. He is looking back to Horus standing on a

16 The sun that created the new world asked the remaining Geb to order his serpents and reptiles so they would not bite anyone. Moses will build an artifact of rising serpents to tackle a similar problem.

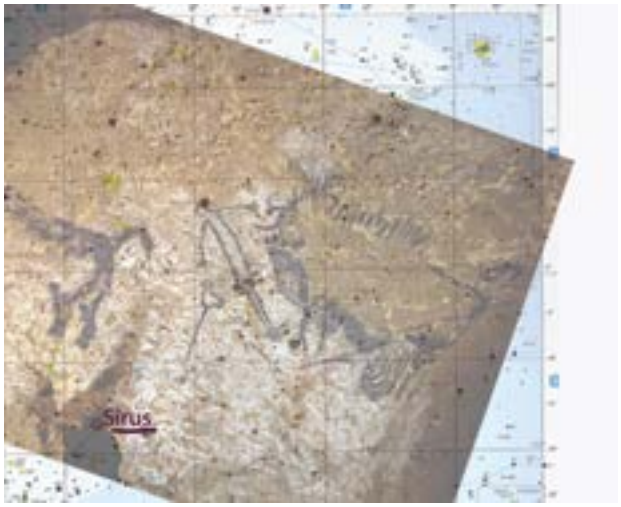
17 Glyn Jones mentions that Sirus was not visible in Lascaux when the paintings are said to have been painted. This would make it more interesting. The moment in the cycle of the year was the same. In the Athenian ritual calendar, the appearance of the Hyades (a cluster on the horns of the bull) signaled the beginning of the rainy season when the crops were mature and the threshing cereals had to happen so they would not decompose.

column. Other than this icon that keeps well into the Egyptian worldview, three levels of Osiris can be said to already exist in Lascaux: his fragmentation, his standing as Orion and his travel to a higher sky.

14.

Osiris (Orion) travels past Taurus into the Pleiades. On the left we can see Horus on the column, an icon like the bird on stick. He has passed the ecliptic[18] (that goes from the Pleiades to the Hyades in Taurus´s horns) so it is possible that Horus is the Sun. In figure 12 we can see the length of his stick determines the distance of Orion´s rising.

It has been studied that Sirus was not visible in Lascaux at the time of the paintings but perhaps the people of Lascaux were familiar with lower latitudes. If we use the crack wall as part of the story, we will see a space for Sirus rising, traveling, and then going back into the void. The following figure to the left of the birdman is a rhinoceros who (just like the birdman) will trace different constellations with its body. The horned crack functions like the door to the invisible part of the sky (the underworld in Egyptian terms). Its shape is somewhat reminiscent of the 17-foot pit through which they had to descend with ropes to come to this part of the cave. The split in the rock allowed, therefore, to represent the appearance and disappearance of some of the Southern stars.[19] Besides the crack we will see how the rhinoceros also tracks groups of stars. For this, we use the birdman´s position over Orion. The bull is, therefore, no longer in its correct place in the sky.



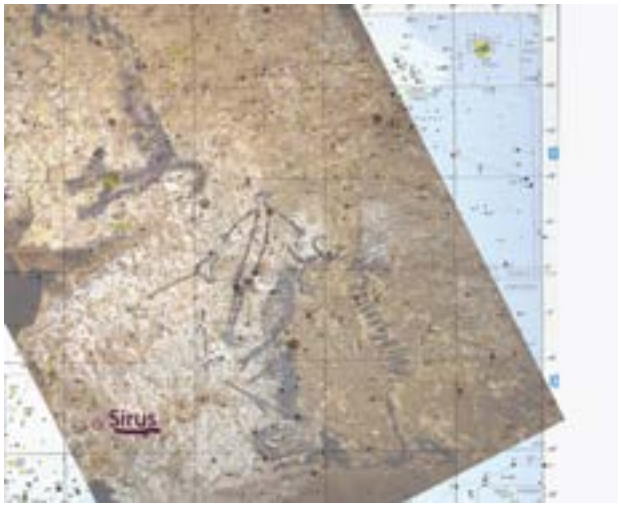
15.

Sirus (her theorical position is in the crack colored with purple) is yet to be born. The rhino does his star tracing with his back, tail and hind leg. This also seems an important position for the bull, the birdman and the hand between the horns. We will be tilting the birdman. There is a runway on that part of the crack. The shape of the crack is that of the horns of a bull. We can find this shape in the ceramic of Halaf of the sixth millenium B. C. where interlinked bull horns are associated with different paths for the stars.[20] The tail of the rhinoceros traces one of Orion´s top triangle stars.

18 Rappenglück (1999).

19 It is probably an example of the precession of the equinoxes. Sweatman & Coombs (2019) give evidence of this knowledge in the Paleolithic.

20 Rice, 1998, p. 68. Rice´s figure 6.1 offers various designs of interlinked Halaf bull horns but does not mention the stars.

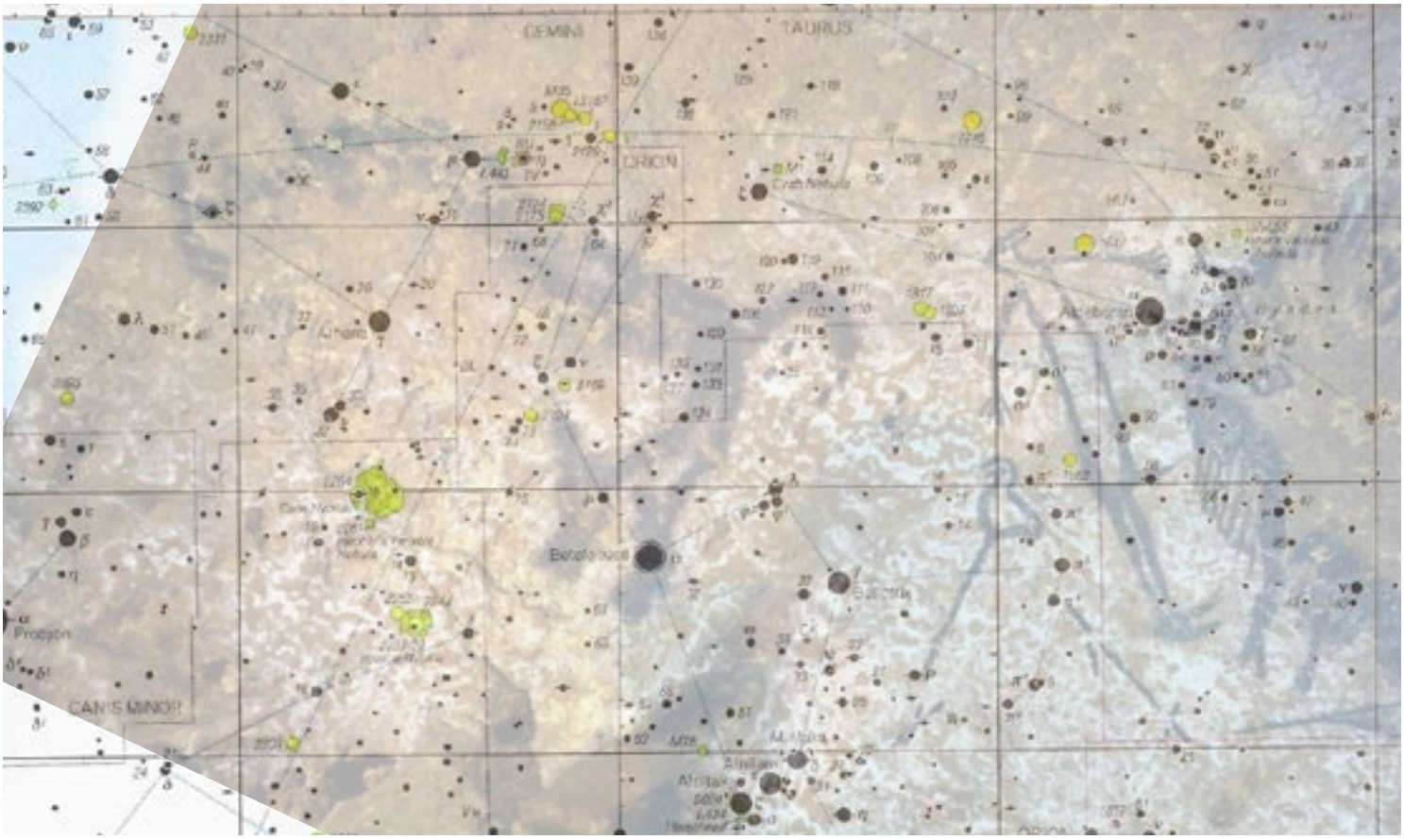


17.

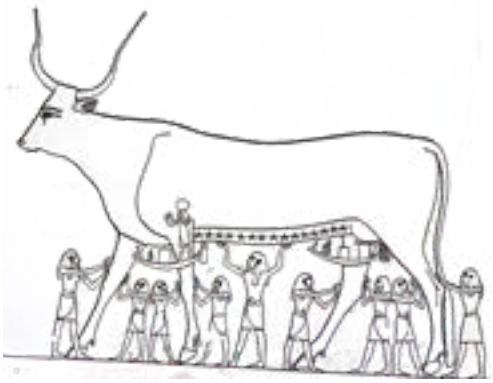
Sirus (in purple) is traveling towards the West. The rhino catches Pollux with his horn hand and the Cone Nebulae with his hind leg. This position seems to have determined a great deal of his shape. The matches are striking in legs and head. In this position the bull´s Y in the leg seem like an important marker because it is back on Orion´s Riegel. There seems to be an arch of stars that goes from the leg of the bull to the leg of the rhino. From Y to Y.

18.

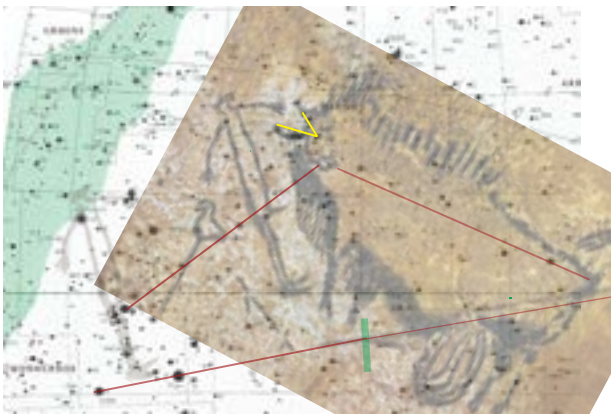
When the birdman reaches Taurus (when the bull´s horns coincide with Taurus) Sirius would no longer visible. The bottom of the belly and the udder of the bull/cow catch and place on their lines a big cluster of stars. The rhinoceros closely traces stars with back, legs (their twoYs have their stars) and also the tail with its leisurely curve. Also, four of the six dots behind the rhinoceros almost coincide with stars.



The rods also establish a narrative. Mary Settgast suggests that they might be symbolic lines of force. In the figure below I show that the first (red) line defines a crucial length of the bull/cow. In Lascaux both lengths and conceptual pairs are significant. This is the length of two crucial distances from the cow´s mouth: one from the center of the birdman´s phallus in Orion, the other to the cow´s vulva. The dark, thick staff that forms the front leg of the bull also points to the mouth, which becomes the visual center of the scene. The actual triangle of the stars in the horns marks this opening. The hand of the bird man can be said to be pointing into it. Vulva and mouth could be a pair touched by a symbolic line of force.

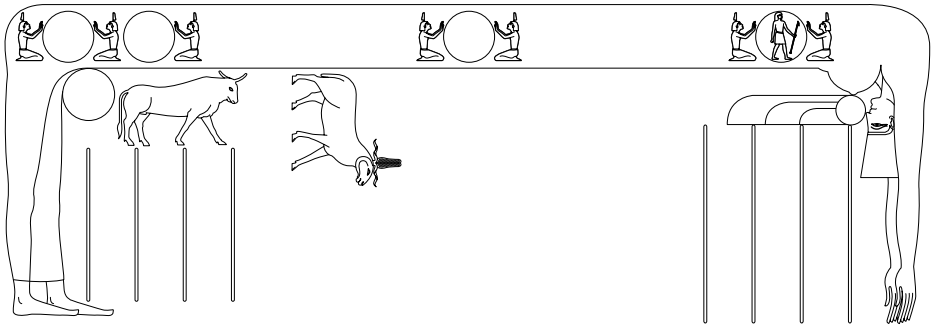


19.



20.

The Egyptian Nut as a crying cow has the stars, suns and beings enter through her vulva and be born through her mouth.



21.

But here Nut receives a being through her mouth. She rolls him in her body and he is born as a bull through her vulva. The mouth and vulva form a conceptual pair, as would parturition and digestion.[21] The other unusual conceptual pair is testicle and udder that will be approached further on.

22.

At the point of entry of the rod, there is a marked ovoid that could be said to represent the vulva. The importance of this shape that is somehow detached and covers the anus is underlined by the cross × beneath it. The fold on the wall further emphasizes and exposes the vulva as we can see in the next image.

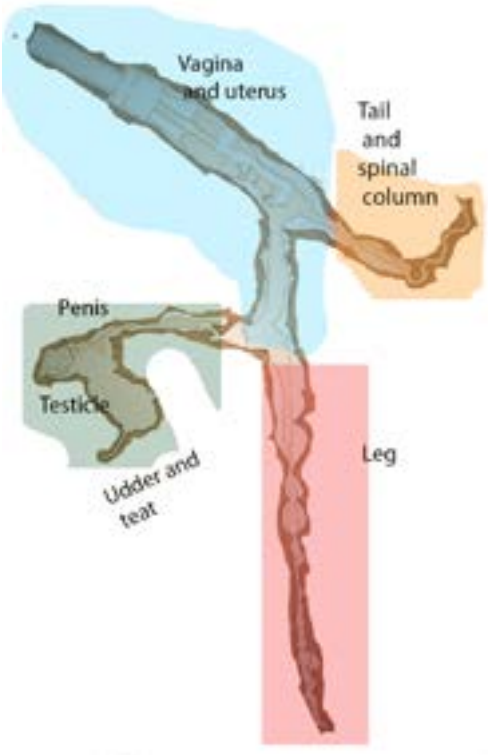
23.

There is a procedure in cultures that depend on the production of milk of stimulating the cow´s vulva to help it produce milk. To this day the Khoikhoi still do it with their own mouth as it is shown in the Paleolitic rock paintings of Imidir and Tassili Ajjer in Algeria dated 2,000 B.C. and 4,000 to 5,000 B. C. So, more than a bisexual cow/bull the castration/udder level of the image could refer to husbandry that both requires

21 Mouth and vulva are used in Nut in a very pointed way. The vulva is an entrance point to a transformation process that occurs in the womb of the cow. That would be a reference to sexuality as such. Then, she sometimes gives birth through the mouth. The process in female bodies seems to be inverted in a way that makes us think of both of the place of the mouth in nourishment and of the vulva in parturition and sexuality. Conversely the cow is not eating those that enter her. She is giving them out as nourishment. The entering through the vulva is to begin a process of rebirth. These apertures were united in the concept of the *akhet* which will be prominent in Gothic architecture and thought in images and temples dedicated to to Goddess Mother.

the castration of the bull and the milking and stimulation of the cow.[22] A production of oxen and cows needs involvement and intervention in their sexual life which once harnassed can be put to use to vastly changing purposes. It should have been a striking to witness the transformation of the fierce brilliance of a wild bull to the dullness of an ox after castration. It might be that it led them to observe male dullness after intercourse and to associate ejaculating as a sort of intermitent castration that could be remedied by a different sexuality. But this is speculation that comes from the erect phallus of the birdman as a contrast to the castrated ox. We can go a bit deeper with what is soley offered by the Lascaux image. The uplifted tail shows that the cow is a willing participant to an exchange. The upstanding hair on her back could mean she is moved by the contact. The rod enters through her vulva. She is a celestial deity receiving her son and these would be but symbols of very subtle aspects of his Eros. The displacement in the birdman is from perceiving a divine creature as fiery bull (his sexual impulse) to its morphing into a nutritious cow: a new place in heaven, a new life on Earth. The birdman´s body and the rhino are filled with stars and set deep into a cave and deeper still down a shaft in a depiction that spells out the intention to move towards the celestial cow/bull.

It has often been observed that these paintings work with the relief of the rocks in such a way that they discover forms and spaces that were already present. There are also many obvious instances of how the negative space is significant in their art. Their acute sensibility to natural form also seems to happen in the general layout of the cave. It would be surprising and yet impossible to prove. Diagrams of the sky are more trustworthy than anatomical diagrams of cows and bulls that are but late descendants perhaps of the aurochs, bisons or some other creatures.[23] But it is not only that. There is a certain anatomic jumble in these anatomic features of the caves that can easily produce disbelief. And yet, such jumbles are often present in the paintings themselves. So, I will lay it out as a hypothesis, one that raises many questions about how they could ever understand and map the inner shapes of the cavities. It is possible that they operated just like a child that is blind from birth can learn to 'see' by hearing his own sounds bounce off objects. Spending time in the dark is said to produce the deepest of meditations. So came about a symbolic resonance with the cave itself. But how did the cave produce those shapes? I can not explain any of this and it would certainly be more prudent to skip it but it is there.

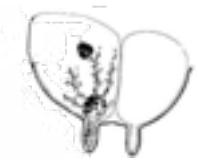


24. Diagram of Lascaux

22 Magelenian Lascaux's paintings are dated from 17,000 to 13,000 B.C. Current views see them as pertaining to the time and culture of hunter-gatherers. Recent scholarship has found traces of the management of Berbery sheep as early as 18,000 B.C. in North Africa (Settegast, 1986, p. 3).

23 The ancestor of the modern bull was the *Bos Primigenius* or auroch measuring two meters to his shoulder and weighing about a ton. (Rice, 1998, p. 23).

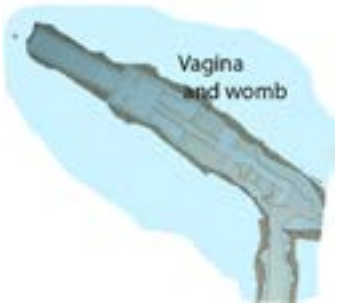
A bull´s phallus and testicles. The traits of the glans tell us the penis is not erect.

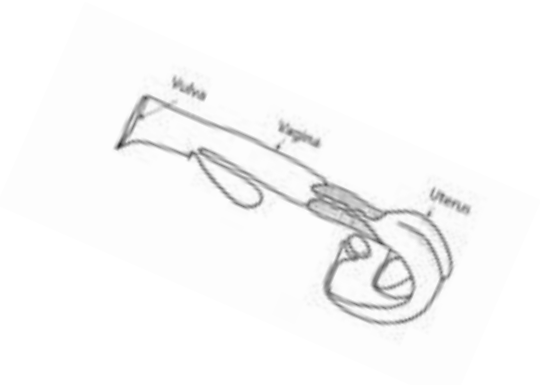


A cow´s udder and teat.

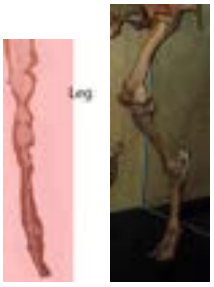
25. 26.

As with the bull/cow, the ovoid would be a testicle, udder here with the teat. The chamber where the scene of the birdman and the bull/cow is would correspond to the tip of the bull´s penis, a fitting opening for the meaning of the scene.





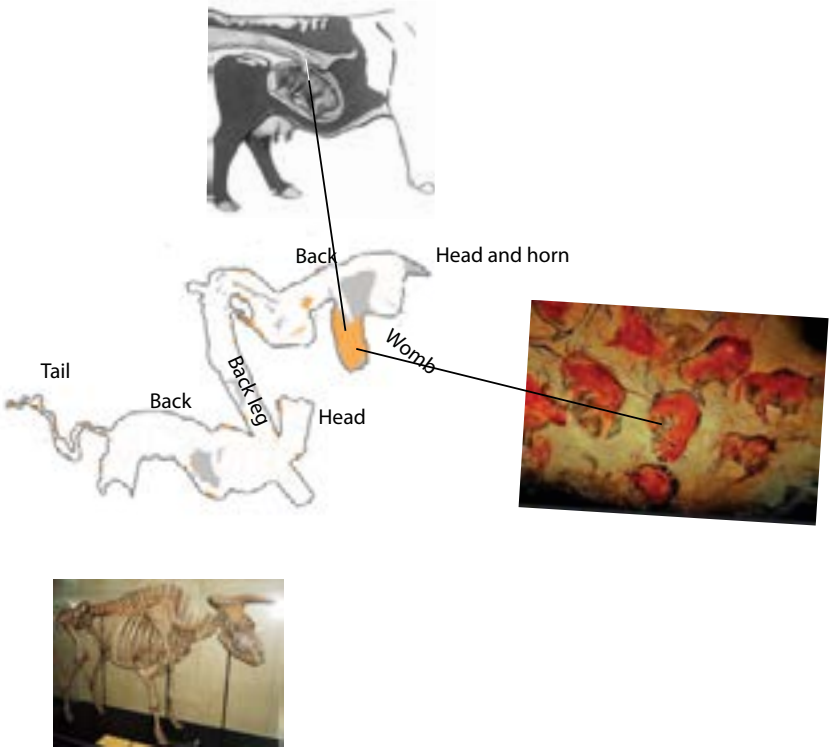
27-28 Cow´s reproductive organs.



29-30. Hind leg of an auroch.

31-32. Sacrum, tail bones (inverted from their position in Lascaux). They would be part of a second cow placed in the opposite direction.

Altamira is another candidate for this hypothesis.



33.

In Altamira, there would be two forward-facing aurochs. The top one would be pregnant. Many of the passages seem to happen inside the bones but some also are explorations of the soft tissues and organs.

The caves of Lascaux and Altamira would be like anatomical dissections. We can not be sure they were aware of this. But in Altamira, the case of the bisons in a fetal position corresponding to the womb, and in Lascaux, the birdman´s scene in the tip of the phallus, there does seem to be a symbolic resonance with the shape of the space. We have followed how the inner space of the bull/cow and the birdman were on their minds. It is a qualitative space. Mouth or vagina, digestive or generative were also groups of stars (as the bull) enclosed as a life form endowed with strength. The birdman and the bird themselves are empty traces to be filled by the sky and stars. If the Magdalenian had any intention of seeing the caves as anatomic renderings of the great animals it could have also been an exploration of their own live bodily functions and inner spaces. They would have been seeing these functions and spaces within themselves and so in essence have been able to experiment the dynamic quality of space itself. Different traditions establish this as the pinnacle of spiritual transformation.[24] Approaching ancient art through this sort of spiritual experience will bring understanding

24 Longchempa (2001). Longchempa and his school mention the role of sexuality to arrive to this knowledge.

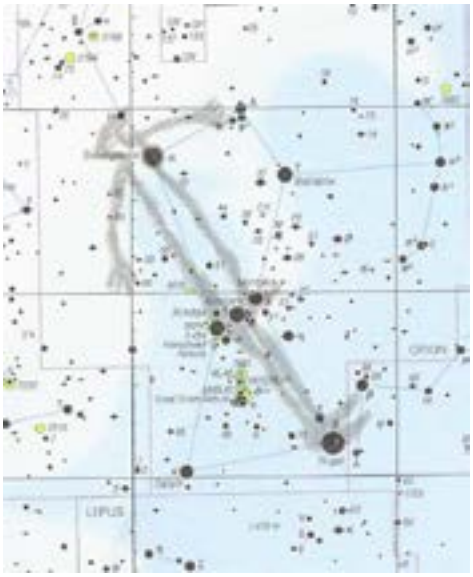
to many figures and shapes that currently baffle us. There are many texts that describe these experiences as related to the body and can be easily translated into shapes.

We can surmise that the dissected cow/bull in the layout of the caves are the celestial cow and bull. However, they would have the same anatomy as the terrestrial cows and bulls. The earth would be a reflection of heaven. Lascaux would reach out from our intimacy to its celestial counterpart through the knowledge of herds, their mating habits, their way of moving, their anatomy, their parental behavior, and their sheer beauty. The herds moving across the walls would be the many whirlwinds of strength inside the celestial mother/father. They would also be animals being hatched for incarnation. This could explain many of the transparencies between the animals and even of single animals that show bones or entrails. The exploration in Lascaux happens not only inside the soft organs but inside the bones particularly of the spinal column. This will be kept in the Egyptian tradition of Nut and in French Gothic architecture.

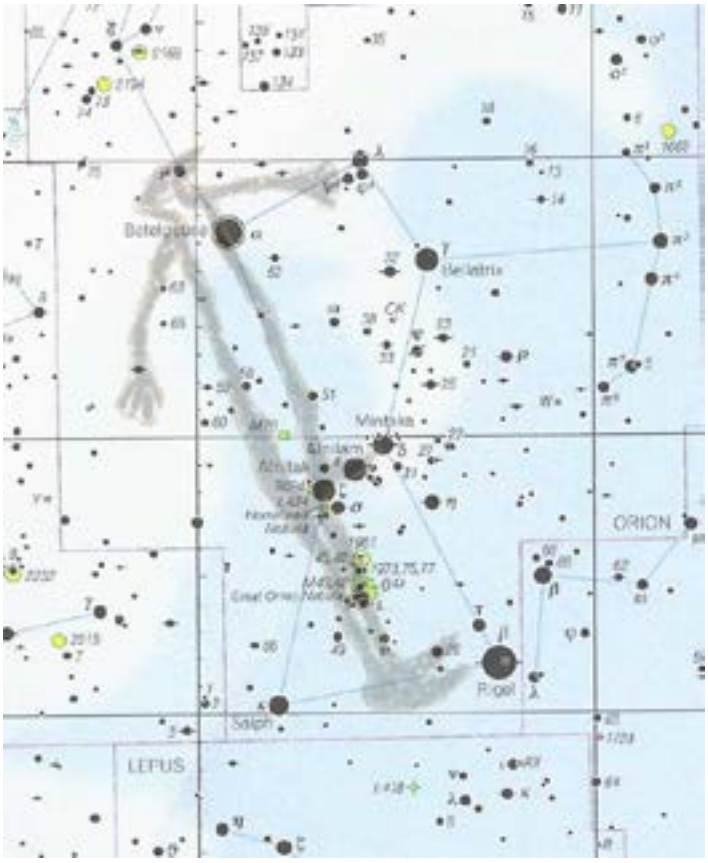
In the shaft chamber, which seems to be the axis of the cave, the birdman is no longer stuck in a constellation and is able to reach a higher place in the sky, one that becomes a nourishing creature. For this to be possible a deep inner displacement needs to happen. In Egypt, it was described as a cycle of manifestation of creative energy from dismemberment to reconstitution, a narrative that was associated with a cycle that follows spirit into matter and back to spirit. The earthly realm and creatures would own the necessary traces for recognizing and enlivening the starry and so help them to have a fuller understanding of their potential and their circumstance.

Appendix

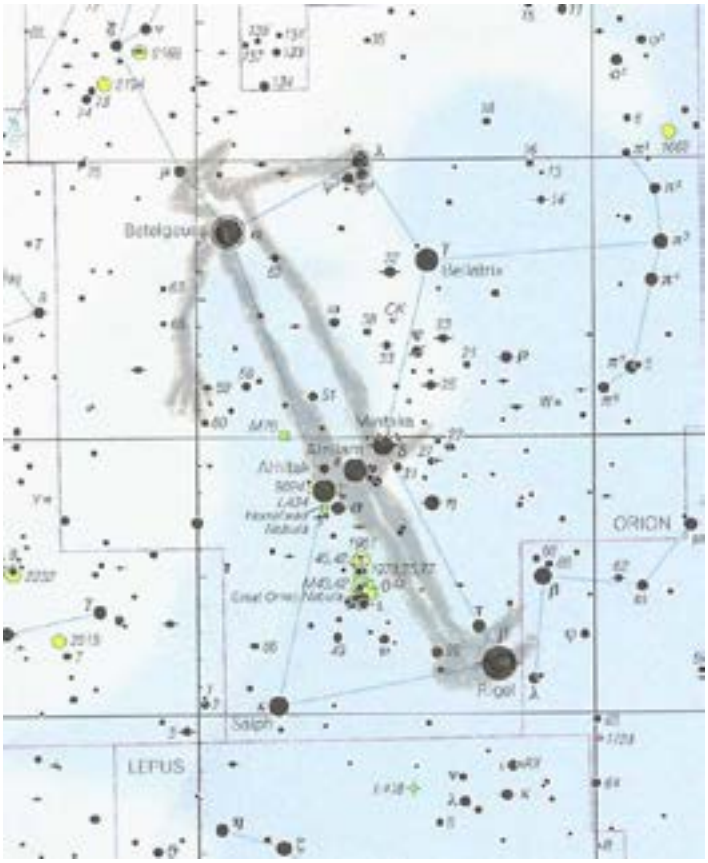
A larger birdman (as taken from figure 4) would give us the following results:



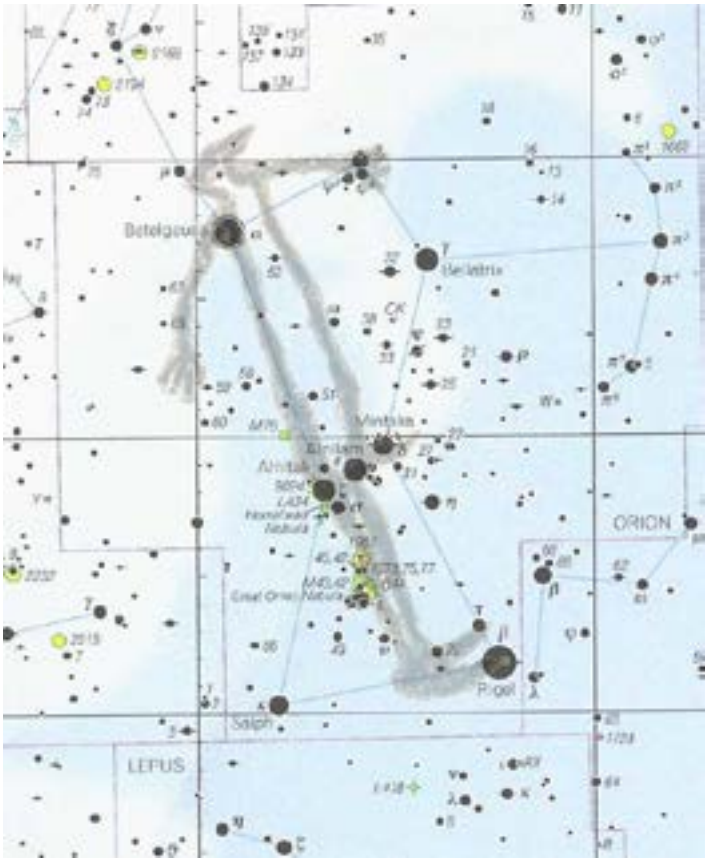
34. Match of stars in beak, left shoulder, the width of the lower torso, the center of the torso, anke feet.



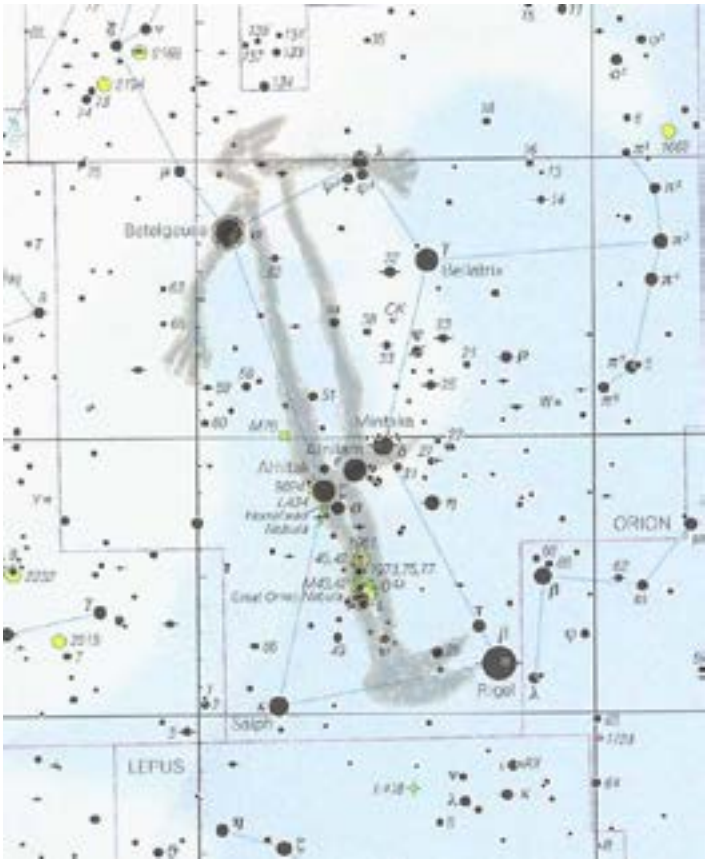
35. Match of stars deeper inside the beak, higher torso, right wrist, contour and length of phallus and waist, leg.



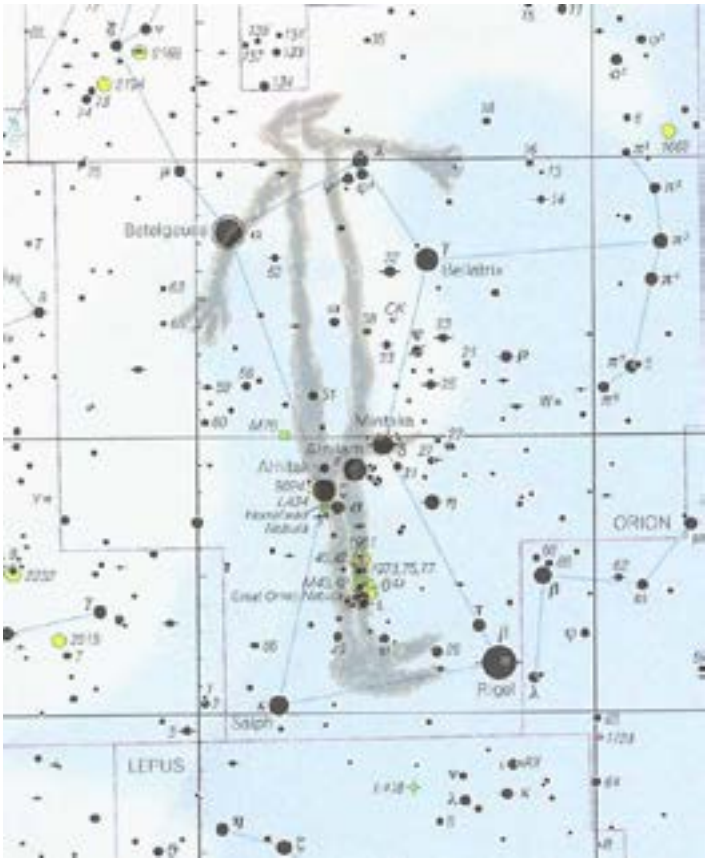
36. Match of stars with fingers, shoulder, top of head, beak and throat, arm, fingers, buttock, the center of the body, the root of the phallus, and feet.



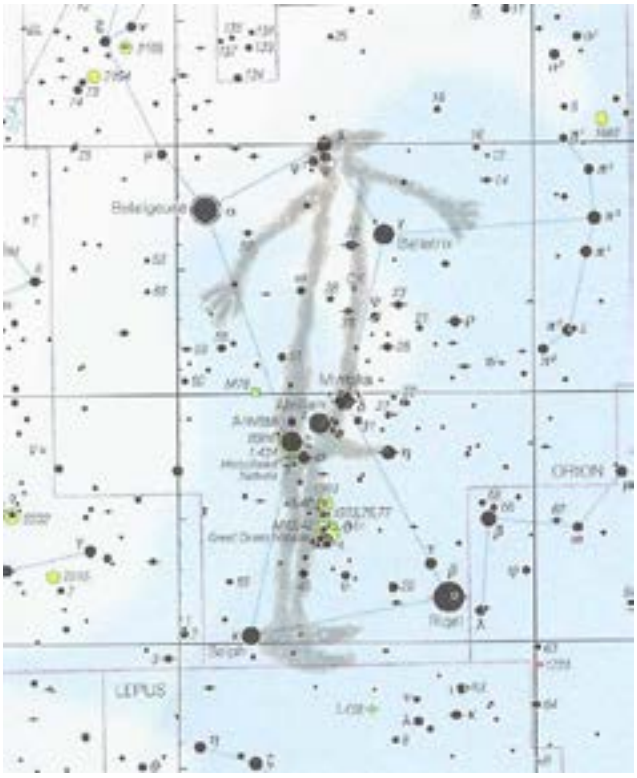
37. Match of stars with shoulder, left wrist, the width of the waist, and feet.



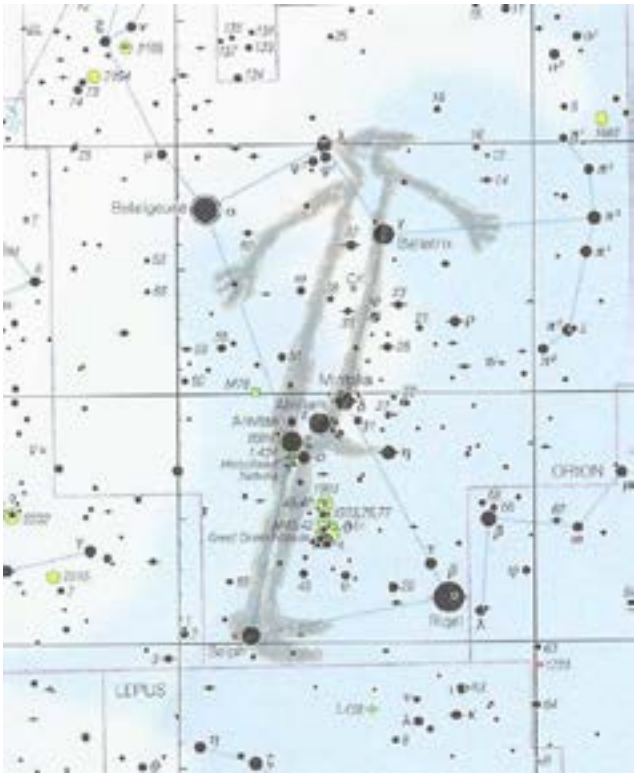
38. Match of stars with shoulder, eye, head, neck, left wrist, lower waist, leg, and foot.



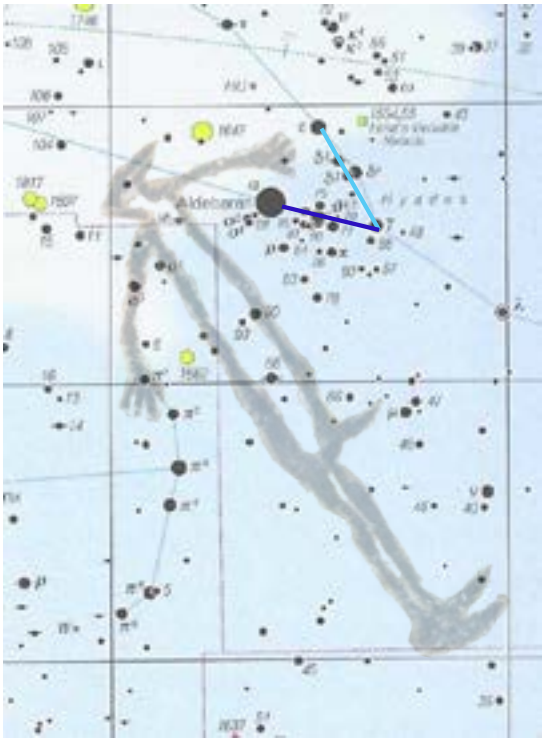
39. Match of stars with an elbow, shoulder, arm, both legs and root of the phallus.



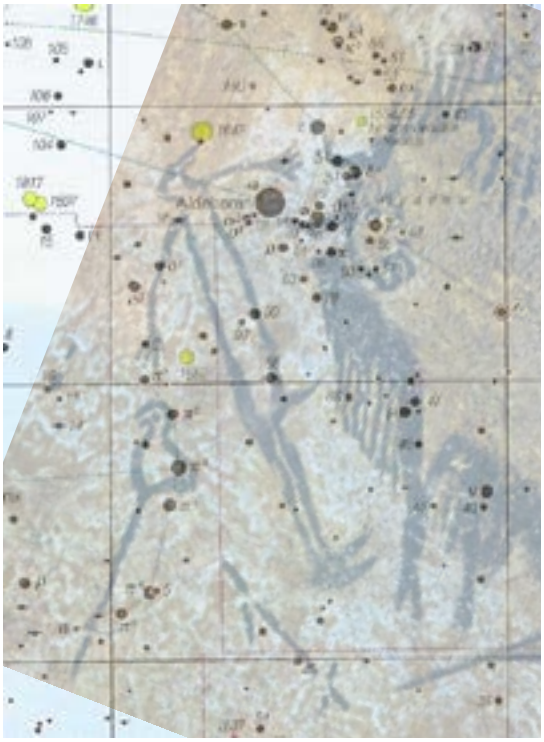
40. Match of stars with wrist and finger, the contour of the head, elbow, chest, the width of the waist, the tip of the phallus, heels and feet.



41. Match of stars with chest waist, phallus, ankle.



42. Match of stars with wrist, triangle between arm, armpit, length of torso, eye, finger, abdomen and foot.

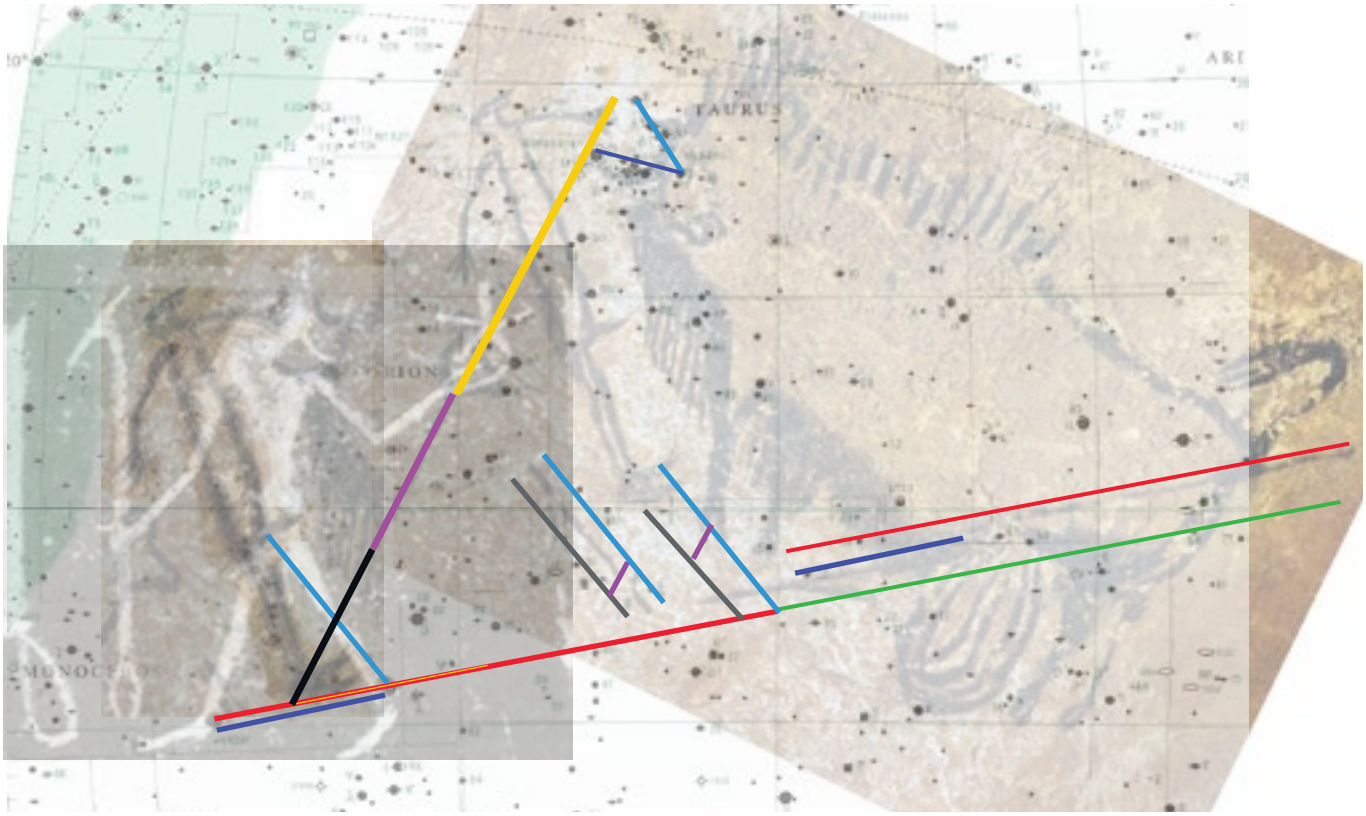


43. As he titlts into the actual angle in Lascaux he seems to relax fully on the semicircle of stars. There are matches with bird, legs, abdomen, shoulder, arm and both hands.

The scaffolding also changes. Some of the measures become more exact.[25] I believe this is because the base sky map is the N*orton Star Atlas* that has a slight different distance of Orion from Taurus. I did not use this atlas for the other positions because the constellations were in different charts and splicing them (as I did here) was not the best option.

44.

25 Taking the rods to account from left to right: the first red line mirrors the shaft that splices the bull which is actually two separate shafts. We stopped at the tip of the one in the bottom and transferred its length to the green shaft set on the tip of this arrow. We used its second half for a separate measurement. Multiplied by two the red shaft (placed at the tip of the arrow and duplicated here as green and red) crosses the line at the base of Orion from Rigel to Saiph and stops exactly there. It will provide the rest-ing place for the bird-man whose feet have that angle. The purple shaft of the perched bird multiplied by two crosses the red line and sets the place where the heel of the birdman is positioned. The light and dark blue shafts fit exactly between stars of Orion underline a triangle that is almost symetrical to the smaller triangle between the horns and eye of the bull. The birdman is being displaced from one triangle to another. One triangle pulls from under the other from the upper body. It is also a 'higher' place in the visible sky. The angle of the displacement is given by the position of the stars in Orion while the height is given by the rolling of the bird across the angled line on top of a support whose length and angle are also determined by Orion and set out in one of the rods.



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